

None, however, as far as I am aware, stay to breed. Geese and Swans I did not observe; but most certainly some species of these also come to us, as they descend to much lower latitudes on the coast of China. I may here remark that a Black Scoter Duck, shot by Capt. Blakiston on the Yangtze, turned out to be the American Black Duck (*Ædemia americana*, Swainson), and not the European *Æ. nigra* as one would have expected. I have never met with this Duck, and have not, therefore, included it in my list.

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XXXIII.—*A Visit to the Islet of Filfla, on the South Coast of Malta.* By CHARLES A. WRIGHT.

STARTING at 7 A.M., on the 16th of May last, with two friends, in a go-cart from Sliema, on the north side of Malta, we reached the sea-side opposite Filfla at about half-past nine o'clock A.M. Filfla is an isolated rock, less than half a mile long, and scarcely a quarter broad, situate on the south coast of Malta, some three or four miles off the shore. On our way from Sliema to the sea-coast, we saw a great many *Corvus monedula*, the only sedentary representative of the Corvine family in Malta. I thought I recognized two or three *Corvus frugilegus*, but, owing to the distance, was not quite sure. The Rook is a bird of passage here, arriving in autumn, and sometimes staying the winter and part of spring. I noticed it this year, beyond all doubt, as late as the beginning of April. It generally leaves long before that time, probably to find a suitable breeding-country further north. In the fields by the roadside several Common Buntings and Short-toed Larks were breeding, and a few Swifts were chasing insects in the higher regions of the air. A Turtle-Dove, a Spectacled Warbler, and several Spotted Flycatchers caught our view as we drove along, and every farmhouse had its colony of noisy Sparrows (*Passer salicicola*). The Spectacled Warbler (the only indigenous Warbler of the island) is also now breeding. On nearing the cliffs on the southern coast, we again fell in with our friends the Jackdaws in great numbers. They appeared to have nests or young ones, as several of the old birds were carrying something in their mouths. A pair of Blue Thrushes (*Petrocincla*

*cyanea*) also had their nest in the same neighbourhood. Stepping over the rocks, I disturbed a Black Snake (*Coluber viridiflavus*) sunning itself, but it wriggled away into a hole in a wall before I could catch hold of it. This, as well as the other Snake (*Cœlopeltis leopardina*) found in Malta, is quite harmless. In a narrow inlet of the sea, where there is a slip for hauling up boats, we found a little *caïque*, or native fishing-boat. We agreed with the owners for five shillings that they should take us over to Filfla and bring us back. The weather was very favourable for our purpose. The heat was moderate, and the sea smooth, though with a slight swell. Our crew, consisting of two stout lads, rowed us over in fifty-five minutes. We made for the best landing-place on the south side of the islet, where the sea was perfectly smooth. The Rock-Pigeons, disturbed at our approach, flew out of the holes and crannies, and wheeled round to the other side of the rock out of sight. A few screeching Swifts were flying high overhead. It is not often one gets a shot at the Pigeons from the boat. The huge masses of rock that have fallen from the sides of the island intervene, and place a considerable distance between the birds and the sea. The island itself, too, is upwards of 150 feet high, and the Pigeons mostly affect the more elevated parts. Just before landing, a Turtle-Dove (*Columba turtur*) flew out within shot, and fell to the gun of one of our party. The first thing that strikes the naturalist on setting his foot on shore are the innumerable black Lizards that dart across his path, or lie basking in the sun's rays within a few feet of him. On reaching the higher parts they become even more plentiful, and are to be seen moving quickly away in all directions at every step he takes, hiding themselves in the crevices of the rocks, or under the stones and such wild plants as are sufficiently foliaceous to afford them momentary protection. Such plants are the sea-samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*), very abundant on the lower parts of the island; and the thorny artichoke (*Cynara horrida*), exceedingly plentiful on the rocky plateau on the summit, which is almost entirely covered with the rich green leaves of this handsome thistle, now in flower. As might be expected, the *Scilla maritima*, or common squill of commerce, is not uncommon; and I also observed a kind of wild

onion or garlic, the stem rising to a height of more than five feet. The familiar *Silene vespertina* and pretty little *Anagallis arvensis* (both the red and the blue varieties) were also seen. They were very much stunted, doubtless from the exposed nature of the situation. I discovered several very healthy and flourishing plants of the *Ecbalium elaterium*, or squirting cucumber. Many of the fruit were ripe, as evinced by their going off, like a hair-triggered pistol, at the slightest touch, discharging their seeds with great force. This is an interesting instance of the innumerable and various ways adopted by nature for scattering the seeds of plants. Another interesting plant noticed is the Caper, but of which species of the two found in Malta I did not ascertain. I have also to mention a large kind of umbelliferous plant pretty common, and several other small plants unknown to me. I took care, however, to bring home specimens. The above, I think, comprise nearly all the scanty flora of this rocky islet. The Black Lizard of Filfla is perfectly black on the upper parts, spotted with green and blue. It is considered to be merely a variety of *Podarces muralis*, of Italy and the Maltese Islands; but no one seeing the two could ever mistake one for the other. Its black colour and larger size distinguish it at a glance. It is what naturalists, in the absence of a better term, may call a "permanent local variety;" but in what respects a permanent variety differs from a species I have never been able to find out. The Filfla Lizard affords a striking and curious illustration of the variation of species produced by local causes.

In an ornithological way, considering the small size of the rock, and that the migratory season is nearly over, we were not disappointed. Besides the Pigeons (an admixture of escaped Domestic Pigeons and the Blue-rock) we saw about a dozen Turtle-Doves (*Columba turtur*) that had doubtless alighted there (the nearest point) on their northern migration from Africa. Although fired at and frequently disturbed, they continued on the island for some hours after our arrival, and probably were there when we left. We also observed from a dozen to eighteen Quails, a Purple Heron (and found another dead), a Squacco Heron, and several small birds, namely, two Wheatears (*Saxicola cenanthe*), three or four Yellow Wagtails, a Tawny Pipit, a Short-toed Lark, two

Wood-warblers, and a Whitethroat. Several Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) skimmed over the ground on the top, catching flies, which there abounded. The Blue Thrush, true to its love of desolate places, was there to cheer us with its song, though rather plaintive withal. The truly indigenous birds of the rock are the Cinereous and Manx Shearwaters and the Storm Petrel (*Thalassidroma pelagica*). We did not find any eggs or young of any of these three species. In June and July the eggs and young of all three may be found. We came across several nets stretched on canes. We were told that they are used to catch the Shearwaters as they leave their holes in the rock in the evening. These birds are all, I believe, more or less crepuscular in their habits. Several of the nets had either live or dead birds of *Puffinus anglorum* entangled in them, which had been left there by the fishermen until they were wanted. Some of the feathers are used to put on hooks for Bonito, Mackerel, &c., and the flesh of the birds is sometimes employed for baiting basket-traps for catching fish. We did not see any Storm Petrels or Cinereous Shearwaters on the island this trip; but on our passage back to Malta under sail, with a fresh breeze from the north-west, we repeatedly fell in with small flocks of them, either floating gracefully on the water or shearing the surface in the manner peculiar to these birds. I must not omit to mention that a large kind of land snail (*Helix candidissima*) was very abundant on Filfla; indeed so much so, on the high level ground, that it was impossible to take a step without crushing dozens of them. On gaining this part of the island, one of our party started a Rabbit (grey), and shortly afterwards another (of a reddish colour), but failed in obtaining either. On making a second ascent after lunch, another Rabbit, or one of the two seen at first, was started and shot. It was a female, tolerably fat, notwithstanding the little herbage the rock affords. While searching for objects of natural history, we were not a little surprised to find here a fragment of iron shell, and lower down a couple of 40-lb. Armstrong shot. It appears that H.M.S. Marlborough had been using the island as a target. In one of the shot the leaden casing was nearly all stripped off; in the other it was very little injured.



When leaving Filfla about 5 P.M., a cutter-yacht bore up for the island. Finding there were friends on board, we pulled alongside, and took three or four of the yachting party ashore in our boat. Wishing them good sport, we then took a fresh departure, and, hoisting our sail, made for the mainland, if I may so call it, which we reached in about an hour, amusing ourselves by the way in expending our remaining powder and shot at the Shearwaters (*Puffinus cinereus*), that appeared in considerable numbers. I suppose the other Shearwater (*Puffinus anglorum*) is more crepuscular, as in my frequent visits to the island, and excursions round the coast of Malta, I never met with it flying in the daytime, whilst *Puffinus cinereus* was almost always to be seen.

In concluding this brief notice of Filfla, I will say a word as to its geological features. From a cursory examination, it appears to me to consist chiefly of the upper formation of Malta—the coralline limestone of Capt. Spratt, R.N.; and the whole island seems to have sunk considerably since the period when it first emerged from the sea. It probably at one time was joined to Malta; but now a deep channel, three or four miles wide, separates it. On the day we visited it, a strong current was setting through the channel from the south-east, in a contrary direction to the wind. Below the upper stratum is a stratum of marl, in which are imbedded a good many *Pectines*, *Terebratulæ*, and other fossils. It is impossible to ascertain how far this stratum extends downwards, from the immense masses of limestone that have become detached from the top, and lie in endless confusion all round the base of the island, and may be detected on the sea-bottom to a considerable distance off the shore, which is entirely made up of their débris. On the side facing Malta, a large portion of the island fell away during the great earthquake that devastated Candia in 1856, which was severely felt all over Malta and Gozo. It is said that, ever since this landslip, a great diminution in the number of Pigeons breeding on the rock has been observed. The noise made in its descent into the sea, I am assured, was distinctly heard on the opposite coast of Malta. In many places deep fissures and cracks may be seen in the superincumbent limestone,

caused by the action of the sea and weather on the soft substratum, thus bringing into effect the law of gravitation. No doubt the island will continue to diminish, until at length it will disappear beneath the waves from which it sprung,—the fate of an adjacent island now covered with 15 feet of water, and known to the fishermen as the “sunken Filfla.” On Filfla is found a tolerable supply of water, slightly brackish, but sufficiently sweet to be eagerly sought after by the thirsty fishermen, who resort there in the heat of the day to take their siesta. The water trickles from the side of the rock, and in one place is collected in a large earthenware basin left by the fishermen for this purpose under the shade of a reclining rock, where even in the height of summer it issues cool and limpid. The reason of this is evident. The water is absorbed in the rainy season by the superlying limestone, and permeates slowly through it, as if through a dripstone, until it comes upon the impervious clay, when it is turned off in a horizontal direction. A thick stalactitic crust has formed on the face of the rock, rising to the height of many feet. An enthusiastic collector of natural curiosities of my acquaintance was once nearly paying dear for attempting to gratify his wish of carrying away a piece of this incrustation. Applying his geologist’s hammer to it, an immense slab of stalactite was dislodged at the blow. Fortunately, he was enabled by a rapid and vigorous leap to escape being crushed by the falling mass. A corresponding depression to that of Filfla, but to a still greater depth in some places, has occurred on the Maltese coast opposite. This downthrow may be traced for several miles along the line of coast, and serves to show the connexion that doubtless once existed between the mainland and the outlying Filfla rock.

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XXXIV.—*Note on the Genus Pyrrhula.*

By EDWARD BLYTH, C.M.Z.S., &c.

(Plate X.)

UNTIL a comparatively recent period but one species of the genus *Pyrrhula*, as it is now generally accepted, was recognized by ornithologists. The Japanese race was not considered worthy